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SUBJECT: EU'S EASTERN PARTNERSHIP HOPES TO RECOGNIZE
"EUROPEAN ASPIRATIONS" WITHOUT PROMISING MEMBERSHIP

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BRUSSELS 00001808 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Chris R. Davis, Political M-C, for reasons 1.5 (B) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: According to EU officials and the Czech Permanent Representation, the European Commission will release the first week in December a report containing proposals for the Eastern Partnership program first proposed by Poland and Sweden in May 2008. The report will recommend signing Association Agreements with five and possibly six post-Soviet Eastern neighbors (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and eventually Belarus, still under EU restrictive measures) in order to provide them with a European perspective, without, however, holding out an automatic prospect of membership. There is considerable debate over elements of the program within the EU and political concerns in some of the potential partnership states. Nonetheless, the launching of the ambitious program would signify an important eastward outreach by the EU. End Summary

¶2. (SBU) Mission has gained several insights into the report expected to be issued by the Commission December 3 on the Eastern Partnership initiative first proposed in May by Poland and Sweden. A press report (which Commission officials have confirmed to us as accurate) states that the EC proposes signing Association Agreements with each of the six former Soviet countries included in the program. The draft report (according to the press) proposes recognizing the "European aspirations" of the six countries and drawing them closer to the EU, without explicitly offering them membership as part of the program. The initiative has a three part emphasis: 1) trade, investment and capacity building, including in the energy sector; 2) visa facilitation with a view toward visa free status; and 3) a people-to-people, civil society, rule of law, and social development component. Reports on the amount of funding proposed vary, with one official telling us the Commission proposal is for a 600 million Euro top up, coming from new money as well as existing funds.

Czech Briefing on
EP program and time-line

¶3. (SBU) The Czech Permanent Representation's experts on Eastern Europe and Central Asia briefed third-country mission representatives November 25 on the Eastern Partnership. The Czech representatives explained that the Commission's proposal contained two tracks: one with bilateral initiatives for each of the six partners, and one with multilateral initiatives bringing the six closer together. On the

bilateral track, the Partnership would aim to conclude association agreements with all six countries. These would be a "new generation of agreements" to replace the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements they currently have. The new agreements would deepen trade and economic relationships and promote the free movement of people. On the latter point, Czech contacts conceded that due to member states' sensitivities, this would have to happen in stages, starting with visa liberalization. The purpose of the multilateral track would be to promote cooperation among the six eventual partner countries themselves, in areas such as economy, energy, and culture. Czech officials said that the EU would "leave the door open" to EU membership for the six countries, but not more, stressing that membership perspective is a particularly sensitive issue for the EU.

¶4. (SBU) Czech Perm Rep officials also described the timeline for EU political discussions on the Partnership. The Commission will present its report on the Partnership December 3, leaving little time for discussion by member states during the remainder of the French EU presidency. Discussions will begin in January in EU working level groups chaired by the Czech presidency, with the aim of approving the Partnership at the European Council in March 2009. The official "launch" would then take place at a Czech presidency-hosted summit, which would include the 27 EU member states and the six partner countries, sometime between March and June 2009. The Czechs expect internal EU discussions on the Eastern Partnership to be tricky, due to differences of opinion among member states. Contacts emphasized that these differences would need to be settled in order for the Partnership's level of ambition to remain high.

¶5. (SBU) The Czech presidency will also begin a discussion
BRUSSELS 00001808 002.2 OF 003

on the financing of the Partnership, although the review of the EU's current financial perspective would not be discussed until after the Czech presidency ends. Czech officials would not provide an estimate for total funding and stressed that financing was a potential problem, with the EU budget already stretched. They said that other funds, such as the European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument, could be used for some projects and that member states could contribute under the Neighborhood Investment Facility. The Partnership could also allow for private investment and the involvement of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Czech contacts said they did not foresee a big new structure (secretariat, etc.) for the Eastern Partnership, but that these matters also remained to be decided. They added that some member states might want to name a Coordinator for the Eastern Partnership, likely through the Commission. Summing up the role of the Czech presidency in the Eastern Partnership, officials stressed that facilitating internal EU discussions on the partnership would not be an easy task. If all went smoothly, the main events during their presidency would be the approval of the Partnership in March and a summit to officially launch it.

Both EU Members and
Prospective Partners
Express Concerns

¶6. (C) Both EU members and prospective eastern partners have raised some concerns about the project as currently described. Ukrainian diplomats here have complained to us that the offer of Association Agreements in the absence of membership perspective (and access to structural funds that membership brings with it) falls short of what Ukraine and the region require. They say they are disappointed that the initiative as it currently stands does not equal what the EU did for the Balkans, where it provided a high profile and long-term political commitment as well as resources to match.

A Nordic diplomat working for the EU conceded privately that an Association Agreement without accession as the end goal would be a dubious incentive for the Eastern neighboring countries to undertake the tough reforms required and make the effort to absorb the "acquis." Moreover, some of the "partner" countries may not want to be seen as trying too hard to integrate with the EU. The Eastern Partnership is already a domestic political football for Moldova, whose president (keen to cut a deal in the future with Moscow on Transnistria) is wary of embracing the Eastern Partnership, even while the Prime Minister has assured the EU that he supports the plan.

¶ 7. (C) EU member state concerns include both the substance and the timing of the project. We have been told that the Germans (supported by the Dutch, Luxembourgeois, British, French, Swedes and others) are rather unhappy about the idea of easing up on visas, meaning there may be no quick result on that front. On timing, the EU and the three Caucasus countries are scheduled to meet at the ministerial level on the margins of the December 9 GAERC. The Germans have reportedly balked at a too forward-leaning approach on the Eastern Partnership (or the issues related to it) in the draft joint statement for the Caucasus meeting out of concern that this could pre-judge EU debate and decisions later that week at the European Council. Czech Perm Rep contacts confirmed that at the EU-Caucasus ministerial, partners will be briefed on the main points of the Commission's proposal, but with an emphasis on the fact that it is only still a Commission proposal, without the approval of member states.

Relex DG Sees Draft as
"Ambitious"

¶ 8. (C) When the Ambassador asked RELEX DG Eneko Landaburu during a November 19 meeting about the Eastern Partnership initiative, he was chary with details. He said the draft proposal, which he characterized as &ambitious,⁸ was the subject of internal discussion. (Comment: Czech PermRep contacts, days before, lamented not yet seeing the draft.) Speaking in terms of two pillars, Landaburu said the initiative would 1) emphasize economic integration among the six countries and 2) their integration with Europe. The latter would explicitly address matters such as energy security, better governance, and institution building. Landaburu said the initiative was not intended to counter Russia, &nor are we addressing security issues,⁸ he added.

BRUSSELS 00001808 003.2 OF 003

¶ 9. (C) Landaburu told the Ambassador he was getting some push-back &within the house⁸ on his request for an additional 600 million euros for the initiative, saying Commission commitments to Pakistan, Afghanistan and Georgia were competing for funds. This money, if granted, he said would be used for energy security and communication infrastructure.

Comment

¶ 10. (C) While the Eastern Partnership faces a number of hurdles before it becomes reality, and while it may fall short in some regards, it would be a significant step forward for the EU's outreach to a key region, and is a step we should welcome publicly and enthusiastically as a positive contribution to broader European stability.

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